

Smashing DETECTIVE STORIES

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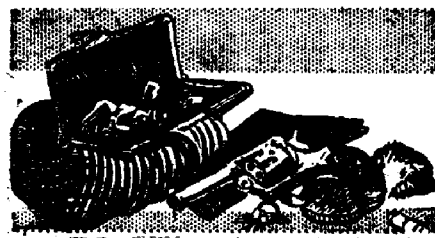
Number 6

Our Featured Novelet

REMAINS TO BE SEEN

by Wadsworth Nealey 6

"You thought me dead, but that remains to be seen."
It was a bad pun, but the aftermath wasn't funny—
not with one murder, one attempted killing, and
further homicide in the offing . . .



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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, *Editor*

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They'd framed Willie this time; this time the demented wretch hadn't killed a cat. And Willie, who thought the world hated him because no one else heard voices the way he did, swore he'd come back and kill the three who'd done this so that he could be put away for good. And now, only one of the three was alive, waiting to have his throat cut like the other two...



ANNIVERSARY OF DEATH

by JACK RITCHIE

THEY'RE ALL positive that Willie won't get me.

The Sheriff has his two deputies here, and there's the lieutenant with six State Troopers. They're all primed and ready sitting here in my living room. About twenty more men are waiting outside to shoot Willie if he shows up.

Clem Purdy and Freddie Houston didn't have this kind of protection. When Freddie died he was alone. Clem was alone, too, when his throat was cut, but that was his own fault. He could have had a bodyguard, but then he had his big idea and he decided he didn't need one.

The red-headed reporter just brought

the cat over and took another picture of me with the cat at my feet. That's how it all started, with those cats. Not directly the killings, but how Willie Taver was and what happened later.

People began finding cats hanging dead from trees and bushes; and sometimes at night there'd be a blaze—and somebody would come on a dead cat that had had gasoline poured on it and lit. We all thought at first that it was done by some of the kids and so didn't get much excited. We don't place especial high store on cats, except for maybe a widow woman here and there who keeps one for a house pet.

But when it happened to dogs, that made it different, everybody got power-

ful indignant and hollered for the sheriff to do something. He was willing enough and did some running around, but he was getting nowhere at all.

Four good hound dogs were lost before the break came—and it was pure luck. That was the Sunday when Clem, Freddie, and me, Walt Harris, took our rods down to the river for some fishing. We three most grew up together and none of us were married. Me and Clem ran the meat market in town and Freddie and his mother were doing the same for the grocery store.

Sitting there on the river bank having a few nips prior to tossing out our lines, we seen Willie Taver sneaking mysterious through the woods. Willie always was a queer one, even when he was a boy; and now when we saw that he had a brown and white tabby under his arm, we stopped our talking and watched quietly.

Willie stopped next to a willow tree fifty feet short of us and set down the cat. Then he reached in his pocket and pulled out some strong cord.

"I'll be damned," whispered Clem. "Looks like Willie's the one who's been doing the killing."

After making a hangman's knot, Willie looped it around the cat's neck and threw the other end of the cord over a branch and began pulling.

THE THREE of us jumped to our feet yelling and started after Willie. His face got white and he turned and took off like a rabbit. He ran fast, dodging through the bushes real tricky, but at the end of a half mile we caught him and brought him down.

Willie was squealing and cursing when we dragged him to face the sheriff. We got handshakes from everybody and some of the citizens passed the hat for us; it came to about forty-five dollars and that was fifteen for each of us.

Willie wouldn't say a thing to the sheriff, being either smart or stubborn enough to want a lawyer. The ones in town all claimed they was mighty busy

and not able to take on another client at this time. I didn't blame them; you can get pretty unpopular defending a man who kills dogs. Finally Willie's uncle had to go clean to Perryville before he could get one.

The lawyer, Willie, and Willie's uncle did some conferring and then Willie admitted to taking care of those cats. The sheriff tried hard to get him to admit killing the dogs, because that was a more serious charge, but Willie just clamped his mouth shut and wouldn't say another word. We was all hoping for a trial in town, but Willie's lawyer was plumb canny. He got the case transferred to the county seat.

Freddie, Clem, and I went on the witness stand, telling what we saw. Then they put Willie on the stand despite his lawyer doing a flock of objecting.

Willie answered a few questions real normal, but then he got to raving about evil cats and how voices had told him to kill as many of them as he could. The prosecutor asked Willie what the voices said about dogs, but Willie's lawyer was up and hollering and the judge said Willie could let that question ride.

The judge listened to Willie's rambling some more and then he stopped the proceedings. He turned Willie over to some doctors to be worked over, and the upshot of it was that Willie was packed off to the county asylum.

Willie was gone for three years and then one day he was back. The doctors must have figured he was cured, though looking at him, we couldn't understand how they come up with that answer.

Willie was more or less paroled to his uncle, working at the lumber mill hauling boards around and anything that was simple. When he wasn't working, he'd wander around talking to himself.

At first some of the kids heaved stones at him, but that stopped when Willie chased the Simpkins boy clear

across town before the boy had sense enough to run into the sheriff's office.

THE SHERIFF locked Willie up again until Willie's uncle got that Perryville lawyer again. There was a lot of argument, with the doctors and the judge who'd sent Willie away getting in on it.

It set most everybody on their heels when they let Willie go and things was made worse when the judge gave the Simpkins boy a tongue-lashing with regard to throwing stones.

The town was buzzing about outside justice for a long while, and Willie's uncle kept him close to home most of the time, but eventually things simmered down. And then about three weeks later Buzz Norbie's setter was found split down the middle with an ax. That dog was worth at least fifty dollars to Buzz, and his wife had to hide his shotgun to keep him from using it on Willie Taver.

The sheriff was burning and he pulled Willie in. But with no witnesses, and that pesky Perryville lawyer pounding on the jail door, he had to let Willie go.

The black looks and the talk didn't bother Willie at all. He'd walk down main street jabbering away to himself and paying no mind to anyone.

Willie built himself a small shack on public land down by the river. He didn't live there, having a room at his uncle's house, but he'd put in a table and a few chairs and he'd stay in there for hours brooding with his thoughts.

A week after Buzz's dog got cleaved, Freddie, Clem, and me took us down to the river for celebrating. Freddie had just give a ring to Margie Carter and he brought along a couple of bottles of white mule.

We lay along the bank passing the bottle now and then and generally getting happy. There was some joshing about how I'd always been the one who carried Margie's books home from school.

"You did all the work, Walt," Freddie said, grinning. "And I got the credit."

"I admire everything about Margie except her judgment," I said. "If you'll quit hogging the bottle, I'll see if I can drink enough to forget a broke heart."

"Here comes Willie," Clem said, pointing up the river. "Hey, Willie!" Clem called. "Come on over and have a drink."

But Willie just gave us black looks and gave us a lot of space as he kept walking down to his shack.

Clem took the bottle after I had m drink. "You fixing to live with your Ma, Freddie?"

Freddie frowned. "I guess I'll have to; I don't think she could take care of herself."

Freddie's Ma was something like Willie, only not so bad. At least right then she wasn't so bad.

She'd come from a big town when she'd married Freddie's Pa and some said as how she'd even been to college. She hadn't been much to look at then, I heard tell, but she was chock full of book learning. She didn't take much to neighbors, claiming that they never talked about anything real important.

AFTER FREDDIE'S Pa died, she took up chess in real earnest. Sometimes she'd go all the way to Perryville for a game with the doctor who lived there. But mostly she'd be studying a board by herself and solving problems. I don't believe anybody in town but her played the game, at least as far as I knew.

She claimed this chess improved her mind, but from what I could see i wasn't doing her much good. There wasn't much housework got done when she was poring over that chess board.

We were near to finishing the bottles as the sun was beginning to set when we got to talking about Willie Taver.

Freddie was grinning kind of foolish.

"I think we folks in the community ought to do something about Willie. He's dangerous to have around."

Clem Purdy hiccuped. "How about lynching him?" he said. "Or is that a mite too severe?"

Freddie took a drink and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "We just seen Willie go to his shack. Suppose when he was coming back he'd see a cat hanging in the path. Right then we jump out out of the bushes and collar him. We could all swear we actual seen him string it up."

"It's a dirty trick," I said, but the white mule was working on me and I got to thinking about the forty-five dollars we collected last time we caught Willie. There might be more in it this time.

Clem was pondering on it too. "Considering that we know Willie killed Buzz's dog, but can't prove it, maybe it would be our civic duty to get Willie put away permanent."

"Where you going to find a cat?" I asked.

Freddie giggled somewhat. "It was seeing that one lying on the log over there give me the idea."

Sure enough, sitting there and watching us was a gray striped cat. We caught that cat and strung it up with fishing line to a bush along the way Willie would come back, and then we hid in the bushes with what was left in the bottles.

We had them finished and it was getting almost too dark to see when we heard Willie coming. When he saw it, he stood there looking at it with his mouth open and full of surprise. And then we stumbled out of the bushes and rushed him.

Willie let out a high-pitched curse and started running like a deer. We took after him, but the whiskey hadn't done us any good and after a couple minutes of running and stumbling over roots, we gave up.

We were panting and wondering what

to do, when Freddie said, "We don't have to catch him. All we need to do is tell the sheriff we saw him hang the cat."

We all agreed on that and made our way back to town where we told our story to the sheriff. He rubbed his hands and the first thing he did was to make us deputies. He had to help Freddie pin on his badge because Freddie was a mite unsteady.

THE SHERIFF took his two deputies down to comb the tracks and sidings, reckoning that crazy or not, Willie would have enough sense to hop the first freight out of town. He sent Clem and Freddie to search Willie's uncle's house and he told me to get my shotgun and try Willie's shack, in case Willie back-tracked.

In the morning I reported back to the sheriff's office and told him that Willie hadn't come back to the shack. The sheriff was tired and sweaty from the night search and he said that no one had seen hide nor hair of Willie.

I was just about to go home and make me some breakfast, when Mister Halley, who runs the Farm Equipment store, came staggering into the sheriff's office. Mister Halley's face was red mad and he had a big bump alongside of his head. When he could calm down enough to talk, he told his story.

Along ten o'clock the night before when the store was closed and he was working on some accounts alone in the back office, he heard a rap on the back door. Through the glass, he seen that it was Willie. Mr. Halley hadn't heard that we were looking for him.

"I was glad to see him," Mr. Halley said. "Sometimes I have Willie get me a cup of coffee and a sandwich from the Diner and right then I was feeling hungry. Willie picks up a few bits that way and I thought that was what he was after now."

But as soon as Willie got in, he pulled out a knife and stuck it against Mr. Halley's stomach. Then he made

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Mr. Halley sit in a chair and used some wire to tie him up.

"He asked me for the combination to the safe," Mr. Halley said. "It had this month's receipts in it, and I was going to tell Willie to go to hell. But then I got a look at his eyes and remembered those animals he had killed. I gave him the numbers without argument."

Willie filled a paper bag with the money—about eight thousand dollars—and then he gave Mr. Halley a bounce on the head with a paperweight. It wasn't until morning that the first clerk showed up to free Mr. Halley.

That took some of the tiredness out of the sheriff and he set about appointing deputies wholesale and organizing them into searching parties. In the afternoon, when the sheriff came in fuming because Willie still wasn't found, he got the letter. It had been mailed from one of the boxes in town and it was a storm of words from Willie.

Cats were his downfall, Willie wrote. They followed him and they spit at him and they were his enemies. He killed them when he could; and he hated dogs, too, because they always snapped at him.

For that matter, the whole world was against him, with people hating and conspiring against him. They thought he was crazy, when all the time he was the sanest man in the world. Mainly they hated him because they were jealous of his power to talk with the voices.

He was going away for a while and he took the money from Mr. Halley so that he would have a stake and not have to work for any of the mean people who hated him.

The last paragraph was written in what looked like brown ink. It was a fancy curse saying that Willie was going to return one day, and when he did, he was going to kill Freddie, and Clem, and me.

The sheriff sent the letter with what

he knew to be Willie's handwriting to the police laboratory in the city. When they were through with their tests, they wrote back that the handwriting was Willie's all right and his fingerprints were all over the letter.

The brown part was written in blood, and by checking with the asylum, they found that it was Willie's blood type.

THE NEXT few weeks there was a heap of searching and there were people who claimed to have seen Willie, but all the leads turned sour. The sheriff finally had to admit that Willie had got clean away.

So time went by and people began forgetting Willie and thinking of other things. One of the things that got them to talking was Freddie's accident.

Two weeks before Freddie and Margie's wedding they were out riding and it happened. I've always told Freddie that drinking and driving don't mix, but the only impression that made on him was to remind him that he needed another drink. Drunk or sober, he always drove like a maniac, not allowing any consideration for curves, and this time he didn't make one.

Margie Carter was killed outright and Freddie got about as near to being killed as was possible. He was broke in a dozen places, but he was alive and was rushed to the hospital.

They kept him there for more than six months before they let him go and even then he was still beat up and had to get around with crutches.

The accident, and Freddie's almost dying, made his mother queerer than ever. While he was in the hospital she ran the store, but it made only a bare living for her and I don't know what she did about the hospital bills. The way she muttered and her far-away stares scared away a lot of customers.

She seemed to get somewhat better when Freddie was let out of the hospital, but that lasted only while Freddie was alive.

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One night when she came back from playing chess in Perryville she found him dead in the living room. He was sitting in an easy chair with his throat cut from ear to ear; and beside him was a dead cat.

The sheriff might have made it a routine hunt for motives, and such, but the cat pulled him up short. And then somebody pointed out to him what he was already thinking of. It was exactly one year the day that Willie had disappeared!

THE WORD that Willie was back went around like wildfire and there were more volunteer deputies than the sheriff could handle. They combed that countryside, looking everywhere a man could hide, but they just couldn't locate Willie.

"I don't know where that boy could be hiding," the sheriff said after two days of searching. "But wherever it is, it's a beaut."

He assigned each of his deputies to following us, and Clem and me bought ourselves pistols. They were with us most of the day for about a month and then the citizens started complaining. They didn't like how those deputies concentrating on us cut down on protection for the rest of the town. The tramps down at the switch yards were getting mighty bold, and the deputies ought to look to controlling them instead of wasting their time on us. The elections was coming on, so the sheriff listened to them and took away the deputies.

The months went by with nothing happening, until at last we decided to put the pistols away. We reasoned that if Willie had any more killing in mind he was going to save it for the Anniversary Day. That's what we started calling it—the Anniversary Day.

And so when a year passed and the anniversary came around, we were ready. We closed the butcher shop and spent the entire twenty-four hours in the house that Clem rents. The sheriff

came down in the evening with his deputies, having one patrol the outside while the other stayed in the house with us.

Toward the last few hours the tension began building up. The last one was the worst, and Clem was putting away liquor fast. But the minutes went by and the clock finally struck midnight without anything happening. We all let out a breath at once and poured another round of drinks.

"It's my guess that Willie has decided to forget about the whole thing," the sheriff said, tossing off his drink. "Either that or he's come to the conclusion that it's too dangerous to try."

The sheriff wasn't taking any chances though. He had us guarded the rest of the night and the next day before pulling his men away.

Life went back to normal and it would have stayed that way, but then Clem began getting his idea.

When you grow up with a man, going to school with him, fishing and hunting and working with him, you get to know him pretty well. And that was why I could tell when the idea began working on him. He nursed it a long time, working it over, and then one day about eleven months later he came down to the store wearing his gun.

"You can never tell about Willie," he told all the folks who asked him about the gun. "He might strike at me any time."

A week later he took me aside and began talking. "I'm selling out my half of the shop," he said. "There isn't really enough business for two of us in this town."

"We been doing all right, Clem," I said; "we ain't exactly starving."

"Maybe not, but I'm heading for Perryville. It's a bigger place and I aim to make more money there," Clem said. "I'm giving you first chance to buy me out."

We talked it back and forth until I seen it was no use. I went down to

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the bank for a loan and didn't have much trouble getting it. I paid Clem off and had the partnership papers changed.

"When you thinking of leaving town?" I asked him.

I could see his Big Idea shine in his eyes. "I'm staying until the Anniversary Day," he said; "just to show I ain't scared of Willie, and I'm giving him one more try."

WHEN THE day came close, the sheriff talked to us about providing guards.

"Sheriff," Clem said. "I don't think Willie is going to try anything. Besides, I can sure enough take care of myself." He patted the pistol he had holstered to his belt.

Seeing that was Clem's attitude, I turned down the sheriff's offer myself. "I guess I can take care of myself too," I said.

On the morning of the Anniversary Day when the woman next door to Clem looked out of her kitchen window, she saw him lying on the pavement outside his back door. Clem's throat was cut and he was dead in a pool of blood.

When the sheriff rushed over he found some things to puzzle about. A case of dynamite was under the kitchen table and a dead cat was on the floor. One of the deputies got a shock when he opened a closet door in the house. Another body, with its face bashed in, was huddled in a corner.


No one could identify the extra body—especially because of the way his face was worked on; but nobody in town was missing so the sheriff figured that he must have been one of the hobos from the switch yards.

People were scratching their heads, but the sheriff came up with about the best answer. He reckoned that Willie broke in with the intention of setting up that dynamite to blow Clem to kingdom come!

"While he was fixing things up, this

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tramp must have broke in too, looking for some food or money and Willie had to kill him," the sheriff said. "Then maybe Willie changed his mind, or Clem came home unexpected. Which ever way, Willie met him at the back door and sliced him real good."

It was as good an explanation as any, but it didn't cover why the hobo's fingertips had been gone over with sandpaper.

But that was only the beginning of the day, and the sheriff was plagued with more trouble. Mr. Halley had got himself robbed again. One of his clerks made an estimate that it was of about six thousand dollars. Mr. Halley couldn't tell us exactly how much because Mr. Halley was dead. He was tied up in a chair and gagged and before he had been stuck twice with a knife, his feet had been burned with matches.

THE STORY was really big news now and all the state papers took it up. The Governor sent down State Troopers to take charge of the case. They blocked all roads for thirty miles in every direction and then closed in. Three State Troopers were assigned to me personally, each one taking an eight hour shift and I got into the spirit of things by unpacking my revolver once more.

"The searching and the guarding went on for two weeks before I took things into my own hands and told the Sheriff I was selling out and leaving.

"The strain of waiting to get my throat cut is too much," I said. "I'm getting out of this state and find myself a place that Willie never heard of."

The sheriff was all for the idea, being peeved at having so many troopers under foot, but when the lieutenant in charge of them heard about it, he and some other police officials came swarming down on me.

"This guy Willie had us completely baffled," the lieutenant said. "We

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haven't the faintest notion where he is. But considering that he's nuts, he's bound to make a try for you one of these days."

"Look," I said, "I don't like being bait in a trap. I don't care if you get Willie or not; I'm leaving while my throat is still in one piece."

But they jawed at me for hours until I finally gave in somewhat. I said I'd stay for just one year, up to the Anniversary Day. If they hadn't caught Willie by then, I was moving out.

They kept hammering at me, but I stuck to my guns and in the end they had to settle for it my way. They would keep a guard on me all year long, and then the day after Anniversary Day if Willie still hadn't got me, I could clear out.

And that's the way it is right now. I'm in my living room and it's full with more than a dozen people; it's been exactly a year since Clem was killed and by midnight tonight it'll all be over.

The sheriff is here looking lost and unhappy among all the blue uniforms and two reporters have been let in to cover the waiting. One of them's brought Freddie's mother along, saying that it would pep up the story.

"Grieving mother waiting for the killer of her son," the red-haired reporter said, sounding pleased with his words. "Get a couple of pictures, Al."

The other reporter has the camera and he's taking a lot of pictures. Some are of the sheriff and the State Police, but more are of me looking determined not to get killed.

He's taken a couple of Freddie's mother too, with a shotgun across her lap and the black cat at her feet. The papers are calling Willie the Cat Killer, and the reporters brought along the cat to pose with us.

All these people have got it figured out that Willie must be reading the papers and that he must know that to-

[Turn To Page 92]

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night is his last chance at me. So they're sitting here on the edges of their chairs or pacing around.

Freddie's Ma is staring bleak-eyed at the rug, her lips moving in soft whispers. She's still got that shotgun across her knees and the cat is sitting a few feet away, his tail waving slow and his eyes green and watching.

I HAVE TO work hard to keep from busting out laughing right in their faces.

They're all going to have to wait a long, long time if they want to see Willie. He isn't going to show up tonight or any other night, for that matter. Willie's been dead and buried these four years!

I know this for a fact because I'm the one who killed him, and I'm the one who buried him!

It was on the night when Willie got away from Clem, Freddie, and me and the sheriff made us deputies. I was on my own and sent down to Willie's shack by the Sheriff.

When I found that it was empty, I waited around outside for a couple of hours, thinking that he might decide to come back. And around eleven o'clock he did and he was carrying a paper sack.

He was acting so peculiar and secretive that I kept hidden and let him get into the shack. Then, peaking through a crack in the wall, I saw Willie light a lamp and take out writing paper.

He sat down and commenced to scribbling furious. He had about a page and a half down and I was ready to walk in on him when he stopped and took out his jackknife. I held off a while longer to find out what he was up to. Willie made a cut in his arm and dipped his pen in the blood and went on with his writing.

I let him finish the letter and address an envelope before I put a shoulder to the door and barged in.

His eyes got wild when he saw me

ANNIVERSARY OF DEATH

and he grabbed that jackknife and came for me. He was roaring crazy, and there wasn't much else I could do but slap him hard on the side of the head with the barrel of my shotgun. Willie dropped in his tracks with a moan and I stepped over him to the rickety table to see what he had written. Then I looked in the paper sack and whistled at seeing so much money.

I didn't have any particular notions about it then, but when I glanced down at Willie I saw that he wasn't breathing. I knelt down beside him and shook and talked to him, but it wasn't no use. There was hardly any bleeding, but Willie was dead.

I was wondering what to do next, the thought of all that money interfering with my thinking, and then I saw the shovel in the corner. That was what did it.

I carried Willie outside in the moonlight and buried him under a bush fifty feet away, replacing everything careful so that nobody could tell the ground had been messed with. When I was through, I cleaned the shovel, stuck Willie's letter in my pocket, and took the money home with me.

At my house I hid the money in the attic and then went out and mailed Willie's letter.

IT WAS DIFFERENT with Freddie. When I killed him it was because I was burning with hate for him and what he did to Margie.

I don't guess that anybody really knew how I felt about Margie Carter. I knew she didn't love me the way I loved her, but she liked me and I thought that in time things would work out right for me.

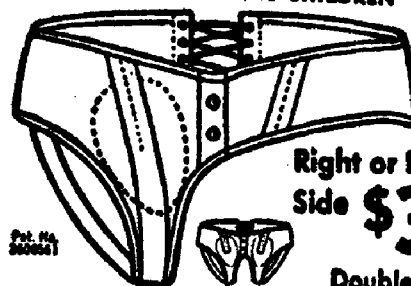
It seemed like a pretty good bet because she didn't seem serious about no one else. Freddie was around once in a while, but I never even thought about him that way.

It hit me pretty hard when she said yes to Freddie. Not enough for killing, but real hard. But I kept it to my-

[Turn Page]

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self and decided that if that was what she wanted, I wasn't going to interfere. The main thing to me was that she should be happy.

And then Freddie went and killed her with his drinking and driving! It was murder to me, just plain murder!

I was boiling enough to kill him right away, but it looked as if he was going to die anyway, so I waited. Only he didn't die.



And so I waited until the Anniversary Day. Willie wasn't going to care if a killing was charged against him. I went to Freddie's house and cut his throat. I felt worse killing the cat.

The second Anniversary Day was funny to me, but I had to go along with everybody else. It passed without Willie making his appearance, of course, but it gave me an idea.

But then Clem got the idea, too, and I waited.

I knew Clem was thinking about something big because I knew him so well. And I was able to figure out what it was because, as I said, I've been thinking about it too.

That money was still in my attic and it was disturbing me how to spend it. If I'd let any of it go in town, people would begin wondering where I got it. And the sheriff might wonder too and come up with a different answer about Willie.

[Turn To Page 96]

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I was certain that Clem would pull off his plan on the Anniversary Day because that was the logical time to do it in order to put the blame on Willie. So a few days before the day, I kept my eye on Clem and began following him when he went out nights. I wasn't far away when he bought the case of dynamite or when he killed the cat and brought it to his house.

I was only thirty yards away when he killed that tramp two nights before the Anniversary and lugged the body home. And I was close enough to hear Mr. Halley gurgle under his gag when Clem stabbed him with the knife.

Clem's plan was simple and direct and just about the way I had been thinking of doing it. He'd take the money he stole from Mr. Halley and what he got for his half of the meat market and headed for new territory.

To give himself time to get away and to put the blame on Willie, Clem would use the hobo, the dynamite, and the cat.



He'd set a long fuse to the dynamite and when he was twenty or more miles away the house would be blown to smithereens. There wouldn't be much to identify but pieces of a man and a cat. Even if some parts of the body didn't get destroyed, there'd be no fingerprints and Clem made sure that the hobo had no face either.

Once again everybody would get ex-
[Turn To Page 98]

cited and once again Willie would be held responsible for another killing.

WHEN I FOLLOWED Clem to where he killed Mr. Halley, I was just admiring how smooth things were working out. But when I saw him raking that money out of the safe, I got other ideas.

They say that killing gets easy after a while and I guess they're right. When Clem got back to his house I was waiting for him in the bushes, and when he put the key to his back door, I came on him and cut his throat from behind.

Maybe I should have felt sorry, but I didn't. I remember that I even got a little sore because some of Clem's blood got on the money—but I took it, anyway.

And now this is another anniversary and they're here waiting for Willie to crawl out of his grave and cut my throat. It sets me to wondering whether Willie really would have gone for us if he'd had the chance. You never can tell with someone like Willie.

I lit a cigaret just now and I let my hand tremble. It's a good touch, and the reporter seen it like he was meant to. "Getting a little nervous?" he asked.

"I ain't scared," I said, but I swallowed and made it loud enough to hear.

The reporter smiled to show that he wasn't being fooled by my brave talk.

In the corner, Freddie's mother is mumbling to herself louder now. I wonder if she's really thinking about Willie at all or whether she's working out one of her chess problems.

All these people are beginning to get on my nerves.

It's pretty close to midnight now. I just lit up another cigaret and got careless with the match. It was still lit when I flipped it toward an ash-tray and missed. It landed on the cat and he let out a yowl of pain.

The sound seemed to get to every-

body and they all jerked up and some of them licked their lips like they was dry. They must have thought that Willie had come at last.

But Freddie's mother didn't jump. She just took her eyes off the floor and she's looking at me.

Her eyes are burning black and they make me squirm. A woman like her ought to be locked up. She's crazy enough to be dangerous.

"Only about five minutes to twelve," the sheriff said, "Willie hasn't got much time."

The red-haired reporter checked his wrist watch. "I hope this doesn't turn out to be a fizzle."

I wish Freddie's mother would take her eyes off me and I wish somebody would have sense enough take that shotgun away from her.

She's smiling in a funny way now, as if she just solved one of her chess problems.

It's dead quiet except for the ticking of the clock and far away a dog is howling. Somehow, everyone seems to be watching Freddie's mother; she's moved that shotgun and it's pointed straight at me.

The State Police Lieutenant is speaking softly and urgently. "Get that gun away from her, Clancy, but be careful about it. It's loaded and the safety is off."

There's a fleck of saliva on the corners of her secret smile and her finger is squeezing that trigger. She's got it all in that crazy head of hers! She's got it all figured out, or maybe just enough of it!

The clock is striking and I can't move or take my eyes away from hers. They're shining yellowish and they know!

The cat is beginning to arch his back and he's yowling again; the trooper is moving fast now for the shotgun, but he's too late.

He's just too late, and the world is exploding in my face!